Teen Social Skills
**Table of Contents**

Page 3 Lack Of Tact

Page 4 Improving Social Understanding

Page 5 Coping with Recess and Lunchtime

Page 7 Classroom Interaction

Page 8 Peer Relationships
Lack of Tact
Points to note

• People with ASD can have great difficulty appreciating the thoughts and feelings of other people due to impaired ‘theory of mind’. This impacts on their ability to understand how their comments affect others.
• The student might comment on a person’s physical appearance, perhaps pointing out in a matter of fact way that they are overweight, bald or have bad skin! This is not done to hurt or embarrass the person; people with autism just tend to ‘tell it like it is’. However, this can be embarrassing, hurtful to others and disruptive in a classroom situation.
• Teaching staff may also face criticism of their teaching style and ability to keep the class under control. For example, this may occur if the student becomes stressed in a noisy environment; the student may criticise the teacher for not controlling the noise level.
• Young people with autism have no concept of how their words and actions affect the feelings of others.
• People with autism have no “filter” and don’t understand the concept of not talking about things that may be socially awkward for others. Effectively whatever is on the person’s mind will often come out of their mouth. This level of honesty is often awkward and embarrassing.

Why does this happen?

• Young people with autism do not naturally acquire social skills like other teenagers, they need to be taught what is and isn’t appropriate to say to people.
• Social skill deficits are a core characteristic of autism and should not be overlooked when assessing reasons for inappropriate behaviour.
• Social skill deficits impact on the way the person is accepted by their peers.
• People with autism will have difficulty understanding the thoughts and feelings of others. They may have difficulty understanding and monitoring their own emotions and may also have difficulty adapting to the needs and personalities of others.
• Impairments in social behaviour include limited ability to use gesture, limited or inappropriate facial expression, awkward body language and a peculiar gaze. The young person may misinterpret what is implied by an affectionate touch, such as a touch on the arm or a pat on the back.
• The young person may find it hard to understand the intentions and motivation of other people – that is, why people behave the way they do.
• Impairments in social interaction lead to difficulty with conversational turn-taking, maintaining a topic of conversation and maintaining eye contact.
• As a teacher, you may need to teach a young person with autism social awareness skills that you didn’t have to learn yourself – i.e. social skills that you acquired naturally, like listening without interrupting, and pausing to allow others a turn in conversation.
• Many young people with autism lack an ability to understand the consequences of their behaviour.
What you can do

• Remember a young person with autism needs to be specifically taught social skills; and will not acquire these naturally just by being in a social environment.
• Explain facial expressions, gesture, voice inflection and proximity in social interaction and explain the attitudes and meanings these convey. This could be done through drama and role play.
• Help the young person become aware that other people have feelings, thoughts, attitudes and beliefs that may be different to their own.

• It would certainly help to have a thick skin and keen sense of humour. Remember the student is not being malicious.
• Choose a quiet moment after class to talk to the student, explaining that the co

Improving social understanding
Points to note

• Social skill deficits are a core characteristic of ASD and should not be overlooked when assessing reasons for inappropriate behaviour. Poor social skills impact on the person’s ability to integrate into social settings.
• The young person with ASD is likely to have difficulty understanding the thoughts and feelings of other people and will have difficulty understanding and monitoring internal feelings and emotions. The young person with ASD may also have difficulty adapting to the needs and personalities of other people.
• Impairments in social behaviour include limited ability to use gesture, limited or inappropriate facial expression, awkward body language and a peculiar gaze. The student may also be unable to or have limited ability to interpret gesture, facial expression and body language. The person with ASD may misinterpret what is implied by an affectionate touch, such as a touch on the arm or pat on the back.
• People with ASD find it hard to understand the intentions and motivation of other people.
• Impairments in social interaction lead to difficulty with conversational turn-taking, maintaining a topic of conversation and maintaining eye contact.
• Young people with ASD don’t naturally acquire the social awareness skills like listening without interrupting and pausing to allow others a turn in conversation. They need to be shown what is appropriate.
• The young person with ASD will have limited ability to understand the consequences of their behaviour.

What you can do

• People with ASD need to be specifically taught social skills; they do not acquire these naturally by being in a social environment.
• Draw the person’s attention to the use of facial expressions, gesture, voice inflection and proximity in social interaction and explain the attitudes and meaning they convey. This can be done through drama and role play.
• Improving social understanding will help all students become more aware of direct and indirect means of communication, improving relationships with peers and teaching staff.
• Some suggested topics to improve social understanding:
- developing self-awareness,
- developing social interaction skills such as turn taking and waiting,
- recognising that other people have feelings, thoughts, attitudes and beliefs that may be different to their own,
- using and interpreting body language, facial expression, gestures,
- understanding metaphors and idioms,
- understanding inference and implied meaning,
- understanding words and phrases that have more than one meaning.

• Most people with ASD have difficulty putting themselves in ‘another person’s shoes’. The person may also have a limited ability to take an introspective view of their own behaviour.
• Encourage the student to join in any groups or clubs at the school that relate to an area of interest. This will provide opportunities for interaction with peers. Point out students in the class who are good role models so that the student with ASD can see how to behave. This is important as children and young people with ASD can be easily led astray.

Coping with recess and lunch breaks
Points to note
• In the school ground at recess and lunchtime there is a lot of free movement, noise and open space. There are unwritten rules that must be adhered to. There are many sights, sounds and smells to deal with. There is no structure or routine to recess and lunchtime. Children with ASD enjoy routine, so they are likely to feel stressed or anxious during this time. Normally-developing children use their breaks to release stress and unwind; the student with ASD may return to the classroom too stressed to concentrate or participate in class.
• The young person with autism may prefer to withdraw during recess and lunch breaks because the child may be tired from social demands and sensory overload in the classroom.
• In the school ground, there is a lot of free movement, noise and vast open spaces. There are unwritten rules that must be adhered to. There are many sights, sounds and smells to deal with. These often cause stress and anxiety.
• The young person may lack imaginative and creative play skills; and may prefer solitary or repetitive pursuits, such as computer games.
• The young person will be vulnerable to teasing and bullying, both physical and verbal, during recess and lunch. Unusual behaviour and poor social skills make the person with ASD stand out as an easy target. They may lack assertiveness and coping mechanisms to deal with being teased which may result in angry outbursts in class sometime after the event. The teen with ASD may not be able to express feelings of distress to an adult or may act out inappropriately.
• Young people with ASD may be naïve and trusting and may be easily led into trouble by others who seek to manipulate an easy target. Other teens may try and get the child to do silly things, hurt others, damage property or steal.
• In the playground, the poor motor skills of the person with autism will be painfully obvious to all. While others play ball games, the young person with autism may avoid doing so because of poor co-ordination and/or motor skills. Attempts to join in ball games may lead to ridicule or fights.
• Some young people with autism are ‘wanderers’ who have little sense of personal danger and no understanding of school boundaries.
• The student with ASD may lack imaginative and creative play skills; and may prefer solitary or repetitive pursuits, such as computer games. This puts him at a disadvantage socially. He may have no interest in his peers’ conversations about clothes, the opposite sex, the latest fads etc.
• The student with ASD will be vulnerable to teasing and bullying during this time. Unusual behaviour and poor social skills will make him stand out as an easy target. People with ASD may lack assertiveness and coping mechanisms to deal with this behaviour, which may result in angry outbursts in class sometime after the event.

What you can do
• Accept that the student may need to be on his own at times, but provide support should he wish to join social activities.
• Encourage the student to learn by watching others play. Talk through the activities to explain the role of each person.
• Incorporate social skill training in class. Have the students act out social situations, such as how to join in a conversation in various circumstances.
• Ensure the student clearly understands the rules regarding school boundaries and ‘out-of-bounds’ areas for his own safety. Use a colour coded map of the school grounds.
• Help the student develop strategies to respond to teasing and unwanted social approaches from others.
• ASD is an invisible handicap – a student with ASD looks like any other student. This makes it difficult for the rest of the teaching community to understand the student’s problems and needs. All teaching staff should be aware of the social difficulties experienced by people with ASD to make allowances (but not excuses) for behaviour. Place a photo of the student in the staffroom along with notes about his behaviour and difficulties. (Check that this is OK with the parents first.)
• Have a pre-arranged place for the young person to go to if it all gets too much. The student should also be aware of who to turn to for support when distressed, such as a school counsellor. If necessary provide the student with photo cards/names of staff they can go to when they need help.
• If possible allow the student access to a resource room, computer room or library at break times. See also Creating a home base.
• Make a picture schedule of lunchtime activities. One hour can seem like a long period of unstructured activity for a student with autism. Split the hour into segments: 20 minutes – eat lunch, 20 minutes – ball games, 20 minutes – other activities.
• Allow the student 10 minutes of time out after returning from recess or lunch. Give him a favourite activity, time at his special interest or listening to music. Some students may prefer a solo run around the oval to de-stress.
• Choose a mature student to keep an eye on the student during recess and lunch breaks. Rotate students on a roster system. Some students require close supervision by an integration aide at all times.
• All students in the school should be aware that bullying is unacceptable through a school policy of positive behaviour management.
• A social story can help the student with ASD cope with breaks, giving ideas for activities and helping him understand school boundaries. See Social Stories.
Classroom interaction

Points to note
• In the classroom, a student with ASD will have difficulty reading the intentions of the teacher and understanding why things happen the way they do.
• The student may find the social dimension of shared learning to be confusing, which is why many students with ASD learn a great deal from educational computer programs. Computer programs present information in a logical and sequential format, perfectly suited to the unique learning style of the student with ASD. The same applies to documentary programs.
• The student may not understand that he is part of a group and may ignore instructions given to the class as a whole.
• The student will need frequent reminders to pay attention, and importantly, what to pay attention to.
• The student may have sensory processing difficulties that make him feel uncomfortable or threatened by the close proximity of other students. Group work may cause anxiety and the student may insist on working alone.
• The student may have difficulty with turn taking and waiting his turn. He may ask a lot of irrelevant questions and constantly interrupt the teacher or his peers.
• The student may seem to ‘switch-off’ at times and seem incapable of tuning into classroom activity.
• Be aware that the student who seems quiet and well-behaved may be most at risk in the classroom; problem issues that are unseen may well go unaddressed until intense frustration results in verbal and/or physical outbursts.

What you can do
• The student will respond best in a classroom environment that is ordered and quiet, with an atmosphere that is encouraging, not critical.
• It is essential that the classroom teacher has a positive and supportive approach toward the student with ASD as other students will pick up on this and also adopt a welcoming attitude.
• Watch for peers who may obviously or subtly annoy the student and ensure they do not sit together. Some peers may feed off or feed back inappropriate behaviours to the student with ASD. While the student with ASD may like these peers, the relationship is not necessarily desirable.
• Consider taking the student out of the classroom to a quiet area for short periods to teach new concepts in a setting free from distraction.
• Avoid doing things for the student that he can do for himself.
• Written instructions, or a combination of text and pictures, should be used to support verbal instructions where possible.
• Be very explicit when giving verbal instructions – don’t assume that the context in which it is given will make the meaning clear.
• Don’t assume that the student will read your intentions from your behaviour.
• Make sure the student clearly understands the daily routine. Use a written timetable reinforced with images if necessary. See Visual supports for more information.
• Take advantage of the number of quality educational computer programs available – if the student has a particular interest in computers he could be rewarded for good
behaviour with extra time on the computer. Students who have difficulty with written tasks can type and print their work.

• Don’t automatically assume misbehaviour if the student is not responding to an instruction. He needs to understand that he is part of the group. Say his name to get his attention before giving instructions, even when giving group instructions. If the student is embarrassed by this, agree on a signal, such as a hand clap, that alerts him to attend.

• The student may not focus on what you consider to be the obvious focus of attention. Again, be explicit. For example, you might need to say, “Look at what I’m holding.” Not simply, “Look over here.”

• Sit the student in the most appropriate place in the classroom, where he is unlikely to be disturbed by the movement and close proximity of others. See also Physical setup of the classroom.

• If the student resists working in small groups, have him work with an integration aide or classroom assistant, if one is available. Then progress to working with one other student, before attempting group work.

• Use teacher-selected groups for classroom activities to ensure the child with ASD is not left out by his classmates.

• Allow for periods of solitude. The social demands of the classroom can be demanding and frustrating.

Peer Relationships
Points to note

• People with autism may appear withdrawn and to prefer their own company, however they often really want to have friends. It can be very difficult for a person with autism to know how to make friends. Sometimes socialising with peers can be exhausting.

• Some young people with autism prefer adult company over their peers. They may seek friendship for what can be learnt from another person, not for social enjoyment. Also, adults are likely to be more understanding of their peculiarities.

• The young person may have a controlling, dictatorial style of interaction with peers and may be very resistant to the suggestions of others. The person may become aggressive if having to incorporate the ideas of others. Others young people may see the student as bossy and authoritative, acting more like a teacher than a friend.

• The young person may have difficulty with concepts such as sharing, waiting and taking turns. People with autism may always want to win or be first and can become over-emotional if they lose. People with ASD don’t like change and uncertainty and tend to be perfectionists.

• People with autism become quite distressed by failed attempts to make friends and the response to this failure can range from arrogance and denial, to poor self-esteem or complete withdrawal.

• The young person may lack the ability to make character judgements. People with ASD may be attracted to peers that are poor role models and will not be able to tell if someone is being nice to them or being sarcastic.

• Some young people with ASD will tolerate being teased and tormented at school just to have company. Some will believe that others are their friends even when it is obvious they are being exploited.
The young person may ‘burn-out’ friends by being too demanding and possessive. The intensity of an exclusive friendship may become intolerable to the friendship group. The young person might not understand that his friends sometimes want to play with others. Sometimes students with ASD react quite rudely and refuse to play with their friend ever again if they can't have an exclusive friendship.

For some students with ASD, the only social interaction they have with their peers is at school because they don't seek out their friends out of school hours unless this is prompted or arranged by their parents.

The student may have limited conversational topics. Some will want to talk exclusively about their preferred interest, not recognising the signs of boredom from their friends. While their friends may prefer to talk about make-up, the opposite sex, TV shows and social gossip, these topics hold little interest for the student with ASD.

When teenagers reach an age where they want to wear the ‘right’ clothes, the student with ASD will struggle to fit in. Fashion is not usually a high priority for them; they tend to dress for comfort and practicality. In adolescence, there may be little motivation to maintain a socially acceptable standard of personal hygiene.

The student may appear to lack empathy, an important factor in any relationship. Friends expect compliments, compassion and kind gestures. The student might be unintentionally rude or unkind due to his inability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. For example, if a friend falls over and hurts himself, the student with ASD might respond by clowning around to make his friend laugh, rather than offer compassion and a helping hand. The friend may see this behaviour as uncaring.

Adolescents with ASD can develop real social phobias. They can become acutely aware of their social errors and the fact that they are ‘different’.

As you can see there are a number of reasons why it is difficult for people with ASD to make and keep friends. However it is not impossible. Remember that if the young person fails to make friends they then cannot practice social and communication skills.

Inappropriate sexual behaviours. Teenagers with ASD experience puberty just like other adolescents. The delays in development associated with ASD do not delay the onset of puberty or sexual feelings. Adolescents with ASD experience the same sexual needs and other physical sensations that accompany physical growth. However, ignorance of social cues combined with an impaired ability to communicate can cause positive sensual feelings to be expressed in unusual or inappropriate behaviours. (see sexuality health and hygiene for further information)

People with ASD sometimes lack self-control. The young person will require ongoing social skills training throughout their secondary schooling to avoid issues with lack of self-control or inappropriate touching.

What you can do

Recognise that the student is socially immature. Interpret and explain social situations and incorporate social skills training into the curriculum. Developing interpersonal skills will help all students learn the benefit of team work, the ability to manage conflict and enjoy successful relationships with peers and teaching staff.

Some suggested topics for social skills training:
- recognising how and when to help others, and when to seek help,
- the ability to judge when criticism is appropriate or inappropriate,
- the ability to tolerate, accept and respond to criticism appropriately,
- how to join in an activity or conservation,
- knowing when and how to give compliments,
- acknowledging the suggestions of others and incorporating their ideas into play / activities and conversations,
- conversational turn-taking,
- using vocals to convey tolerance, empathy, sympathy, arrogance, nonchalance etc,
- compromise and conflict resolution,
- active listening, reading and using body language and facial expression,
- recognising when it is appropriate to make empathetic comments,
- recognising character traits of others and one’s own personality to determine the type of person likely to be a compatible friend,
- approaching a member of the opposite sex, indicating interest both verbally and non-verbally.

- Promote tolerance and understanding amongst the student’s peers by helping them to understand difficulties. Encourage others to interact with the student in group work.

- Encourage imaginative and flexible thinking in classroom activities with “Let’s pretend …” and “What if …” scenarios.
- Teach the student how to respond to unwanted approaches from other students. Practice some social scripts
- Ensure the young person has a school councillor or other appropriate professional available to speak to.

- Encourage the student to befriend other children in the school with ASD. Even if there is an age difference, these friendships can be very successful. They are likely to have similar interests and be more understanding of each other’s peculiarities.
- Social stories are a good way for the student to learn friendship skills. Older students could benefit from having a list of friendship rules.

- Depression and low self-esteem can often develop in adolescence due to loneliness and feeling socially awkward. Depression and anxiety disorders should be treated as mental health issues, not just a feature of the disability.

- Students with ASD need ongoing social skills training so they have the opportunity to learn appropriate social interaction skills prior to reaching puberty. It might seem OK for a 10-year-old to stand too close to peers when talking, but at age 16, this behaviour would be inappropriate and is likely to be misinterpreted.

- Always look at inappropriate behaviour as having a communicative intent. For example, a male student who follows a girl around the school all day might seem threatening or intimidating but perhaps he just doesn’t know how to go about approaching her in a socially acceptable manner.

- With a growing number of females being diagnosed with autism, schools must be aware of the need for protection of and specific training for female students who may be vulnerable to sexual advances from male students.